

[Journal North](#)

By Phil Parker

Saturday, September 05, 2009

Freshman Congressman Ben Ray Luján, D-Santa Fe, says that when it comes to health care reform, he's a staunch supporter of public option — giving Americans the choice of a government-run health insurance program in addition to private plans.

But in an interview in Santa Fe during the congressional recess last week, he stopped short of saying he would not vote for a reform bill that didn't contain a public option provision.

"One of the biggest and most critical parts of this legislation is the public option, bringing costs down and creating a more competitive environment," he said.

Luján did note that his name was among those of 50 congressmen included on a "whip" list — a list of private pledges made by members of Congress before a vote on the issue in July — that was attached to a letter vowing to vote against any bill that does not include a "robust public option."

"As I've talked to more people, as I've listened and studied this issue, it's clear it's critical that we have a mechanism in there that keeps costs down," Luján said. "That mechanism is the public option."

As the health care debate rages like an unchecked forest fire, President Barack Obama has announced he'll give a televised speech on the topic Wednesday before a joint session of Congress.

Speeches before both houses are typically State of the Union addresses. But George W. Bush convened a joint session to speak on security shortly after 9/11. And in 1993, Bill Clinton held a joint session to talk health care reform. Clinton's reform effort ultimately failed.

Luján said he believes it will be different this time.

"Let's look at what's happened over the last 16 years," he said. "We don't even have to go back that far to see that premiums have increased so much in a short time, and those costs are hurting small businesses and families. The problem of people getting turned away, not covered for something because they're sick, those problems have compounded.

"Things are different now," he said.

Luján said polls show Americans want health care reform more than they did during Clinton's presidency. "And for myself and my district, we need to do something to help people," he said.

When Luján attended his only public health care town hall in Santa Fe on Aug. 17, the news was that the public option might not make it into a final bill. Obama had remarked a day earlier that the public option was only a "sliver" of reform.

Democratic Congressman Anthony Weiner of New York, one of Luján's House colleagues, made the rounds on TV news networks about the same time telling talk show hosts health care

reform could lose as many as 100 votes in the House of Representatives if the public option wasn't part of the bill.

Luján disputed the notion that a government-run insurance option would put a bureaucrat between doctors and patients.

"In today's environment, if you have health insurance and you go see your physician, your physician can only treat you based on the coverage you have," he said. "The insurance companies are very much involved in dictating what care you do or don't receive. Then it's up to the insurance company to pay part of the bill as they see fit and that puts a huge burden on the patient."

Luján said part of the cost of reform could be covered by a tax increase for Americans making more than \$280,000 individually or \$350,000 a couple.

And he predicted the House would vote on health care legislation — H.R. 3200, which Luján said contains amendments from both Democrats and Republicans — by the end of this year.

Tele-town Hall

What: Rep. Ben Ray Luján's Telephone Town Hall on Health Insurance Reform

When: 7 p.m. Tuesday, Sept. 8

How to participate: RSVP to Luján's Washington, D.C., office (202) 225-6190 by 10 a.m. Tuesday